



Salimpour School of Dance

Jamila Salimpour, Founder/Director

This is the speech presented
by Jamila Salimpour at the

International Conference on Middle Eastern Dance

Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa, CA
May 16-18, 1997



Jamila Salimpour began her performing career at the age of sixteen in Ringling Brothers Circus as an acrobatic dancer. She studied Middle eastern music and dance, and in 1947 began appearing at cultural events and ethnic clubs in Los Angeles, and later in San Francisco, where she owned the Bagdad Cabaret. She began teaching in 1952, developing a unique method of verbal breakdown and terminology for her movements. She has trained innumerable teachers and performers from all over the world, and produced week-long seminars and festivals, often co-teaching with her daughter, Suhaila Salimpour. In 1969 she created the tribal Bal Anat, performing and touring with the forty member troupe. Jamila Salimpour's complex finger cymbal patterns were published in a Finger Cymbal Manual. She also published a history of middle Eastern dance, From Cave to Cult to Cabaret, as well as a photographic collection of Middle eastern dancers at the Chicago World's Faire, and the Dance Format manual. From 1974 to 1990, Ms. Salimpour was the Contributing Editor for HABIBI, a major Middle Eastern dance periodical.

Ibrahim Farrah has been hailed by the New York Times as a "pioneer in Middle Eastern dance in America." He has been a dancer / choreographer / teacher in Middle Eastern dance throughout the world for over 30 years. In New York, he established the Ibrahim Farrah School of Near Eastern Dance, which has catapulted talented students to professional arenas. Mr. Farrah is director / founder of the Ibrahim Farrah Near Eastern Dance Group, with whom he has performed on such notable concert stages as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Kennedy Center, as well as throughout the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Australia. In 1979, Mr. Farrah was the recipient of the Ruth St. Denis Award for outstanding choreography in the genre of ethnic dance. For 21 years he has published ARABESQUE, an internationally acclaimed magazine.



In association with
Sahra C. Kent, Angelika Nemeth and Shareen el Safy



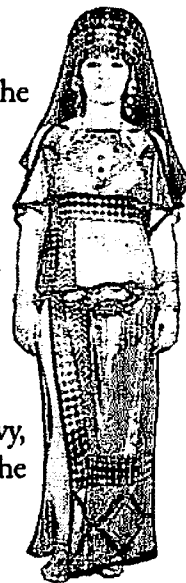
Jamila at the Bagdad Cabaret, 1962

Hello and welcome to you all. I am honored to be here tonight and to be a part of the first International Middle-Eastern Dance Conference.

In 60 minutes I am going to try to give you a glimpse into my journey with this dance. For those of you who already know me, you will hear my personal experience, and those of you who are just getting to know me, will also get a look into the history of Middle-Eastern dance in America through my story. Please remember those were different times and I was struggling to create something that had never been done before, my love and passion for the dance always guiding me when there were no role models.

My basic Oriental dance training came first from my father who was in the Sicilian Navy, stationed in the Middle East in 1910. His favorite pastime when in Egypt was watching the Ghawazee dance.

Here is an excerpt from my father's letter:



The first time I saw an arabian dancer it was at Alexandria Egypt in 1910 on a corner of a public square on carpet-canvas like carpet. There were 3 players - one a clarinet, a chitar-small type and a little drum I think. The dancer was bare foot, bare arms to the shoulder, bare back down to the curve of the buttocks - there a belt holding a tight fitting indument ending in strips of different colors half way to the legs. She had a large necklace made out of small disks of white metal, probably tin. a row white and one yellow - probably gold gilded - kept together with thin chains of the same color. These disks were about the size of a dime on top - distant one another one diameter - a larger size of disks down next row and so on - 7" or 8" long. 2 small cups for brasses that would come up from a garment held up from the belt in front leaving uncovered the front of the stomach - rings on both arms and forearms to the wrist 3 or 4 up and 6 or so below to the wrist - The twistings were to the music and the onlookers would throw money on the canvas - The party would scramble and she would quickly get covered otherwise she would get pinched for it was performed in a public square. The English were there at the time and us sailors would feast our eyes for we liked to look at that type of dancing - When in Tunis or Algiers or Oran or Tripoli or Bengasi more or less it was the same -



When I was young he used to imitate them for us. In the late '40s my Egyptian landlady and I would go to the Egyptian movies every month. We saw many dancers, including Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal. We would come home, put on Abdel Wahab and Farid Al Atrash records, and dance, trying to remember every move we'd seen. And so, from my father's recollections, my landlady's firsthand knowledge, and from the movie's examples, this was how I got my dance information.

I first taught Oriental Dance in the early- 1950s to old 78, three-minute Cife Telli records. Not having a dance vocabulary yet, I repeated the music as I improvised the dance. My students watched and imitated me, asking questions which often I couldn't answer. I would just perform the dance again and again until they got it. Often, I would do variations on the theme, overlaying the basic movements, causing confusion, because I couldn't break it down. Since I had never been taught the dance, I didn't know how to teach the dance. There were no teachers, schools, or method that existed.

From this background, I was ready at the beginning of the Arabic night-club craze, which erupted onto the scenes in the late 1950s. Whatever the catalyst, Americans were becoming curious about this dance and the music. Clubs sprouted in Hollywood. 1001 Nights on Sunset and Vine never made it. Hersheway's, across the street from the Farmer's Market, was short-lived. The Greek Village was the first club to open with its spontaneous weekend

entertainment of dance-crazed Greek sailors. They didn't want a belly-dancer for a long time. Then the Fez opened with an Egyptian trio featuring Siham, the cause of my marital break-up. She was the quintessential femme fatale. Her dance was indescribable. Shaker's Oasis brought Turkish dancers from a club in Chicago.

As business was beginning to boom, Middle-Eastern dancers were being imported to the clubs and I had the chance to watch show after show of technique. The repetition of the performers enabled me to observe a variety of movements which I mentally recorded and added to my repertoire. The majority of dancers in Los Angeles were Egyptian style. There was Zenouba and Maya Medwar, who said she was trained by Ali Reda. Everyone wanted to dance like Maya. She was something to watch but not so easy to imitate.

I commuted to dance in a club in Fresno, where Richard Hagopian played for me. I danced at the Greek Village, and had student nights upstairs at the Fez, where I begged Lou Shelby to let me dance, teach, and hostess. While he was thinking about it I was offered a job dancing at 12 Adler in San Francisco. The money was too good to turn down so I went to dance in San Francisco and never left. Eventually I owned the Bagdad Cabaret on Broadway, hiring musicians and dancers.



A student of Jamila performs upstairs at the Fez, 1959



Jamila dancing at 12 Adler, San Francisco, 1960.

It was only after I went to dance in San Francisco, where dancers were hired from different countries of the Middle East, that I saw a variety of styles. We worked in the same club and imitated each other's specialties, of course, not in the same show, and usually only after they'd left town. Turkish Aisha wowed the audience with her full-body vibrations. During her show I would run to the dressing room to analyze her pivots. Soraya from Morocco danced almost always in Belledi dress, balancing a pot on her head. Fatima Akef danced on water glasses

with "Laura," her parrot, perched on her shoulder. Nargis did the most incredible belly rolls and her entire finale consisted of continuous choo-choos. Fatima Ali did a 4/4 shimmy on the balls of her feet. I was told by Mohammed El Scali that she was a Ouled Nail. And so it went, show after show, night after night, year after year.

Since the musicians were mostly amateurs, and from a variety of Arab countries, the music was haphazard. Rarely did they know the same piece, often going in different directions, and they practiced during the show. Rehearsals were unheard of. Musicians were in short supply so we couldn't complain. You could replace a dancer easier than a musician.

All of the musicals we danced to were in 4/4 rhythm with waha-da-oh-noz for taqseem. Musical like Aziza, with breaks and changes in rhythm, were then only played between shows.

As I worked with and watched dancer after dancer, I would try to describe to my dancer friends some of the things I had seen that were different. When Tabora Najim came to town, it was the first time I had seen what I named the Turkish Drop and stomach flutter. Her veil work was unique and choreographed. She ended all her shows with an exciting Kashlama. Often a dancer would do a step and then do variations on a theme. If a movement was similar or related in some form, I categorized it as a family. I mentally catalogued as much as I could remember and included it in my format.

In Los Angeles, where Arabs made up a large part





*Jamila, in a costume designed
by Bob Mackie*

of the audience, the dance was short and in three parts: entrance, taqseem, and finale. Arabs came to hear the music and singer. In San Francisco, where you had a predominately American audience, they came to see the dancers. They didn't understand Arabic so the songs meant nothing to them. A girl onstage brought the customers in, the owners would say, so now it was three dancers back-to-back, three shows a night.

As time went on my specialty was to become a finger cymbal/shimmy solo which I performed without music, using my coin girdle as a percussion instrument, interspersing shimmy rhythms with finger cymbal variations. I mentally notated 4/4 shimmy, choo-choo, and 3/4 shimmy while practicing my coin solo.



Suhaila, age three

1965 was a turning point in my career. While pregnant with Suhaila I began to teach fulltime. My performing career came to a complete halt the day I got married to Suhaila's father. I was told that both my legs would be broken if I put one foot on the stage. I turned one of the rooms in our apartment into a studio and costume making salon. Not only was I teaching the dance but designing and making costumes as well. I remember having taught Bob Mackie's wife to dance when he was a dishwasher in my restaurant, The Nine Muses. Bob and I had many creative adventures fixing her up for photo sessions and performances. We bought our first piece of assuit together on Olivera Street, which he made into a dress for me. We had no Madame Abla back then.



*Jamila and her husband,
Ardesbir Salimpour*

Suhaila was born severely pigeon-toed, a condition inherited from her father's family. When she began to walk she would trip over her feet. Children were very cruel and would make fun of her. I tried everything, including metal rods with special shoes. Nothing seemed to work. As a last resort I put her in ballet classes three times per week. The first position—turnout-exercises corrected the defect after a few years. Little did I know it was a blessing in disguise.



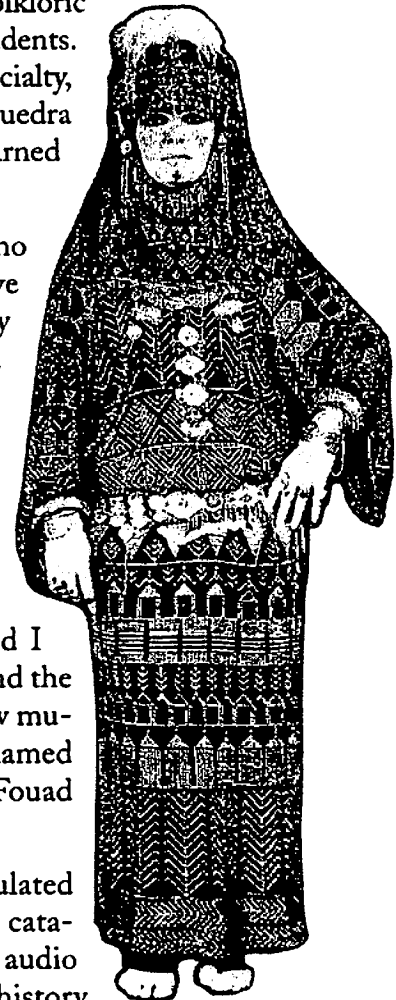
Not only did her posture improve, but it gave Suhaila a body line soon to become characteristic in the new style of Middle Eastern dance.

As Suhaila was growing up, so was the age of video. Now for the price of a video rental you could transport yourself to the hot night-clubs and hotels in the Middle East, seeing firsthand, the latest trends and movements. Americans were now able to tap into the Middle East and not just do our version or interpretation of the dance. This was a turning point in the Salimpour School. When Suhaila was 14-years-old, teaching on her own with her trained body line, she combined her traditional training in my method with the new direction from Egypt.

I began sponsoring dancers from Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Turkey and other countries - Ahmed Jarjour from Lebanon, Lala Hakim, Faten Salama,

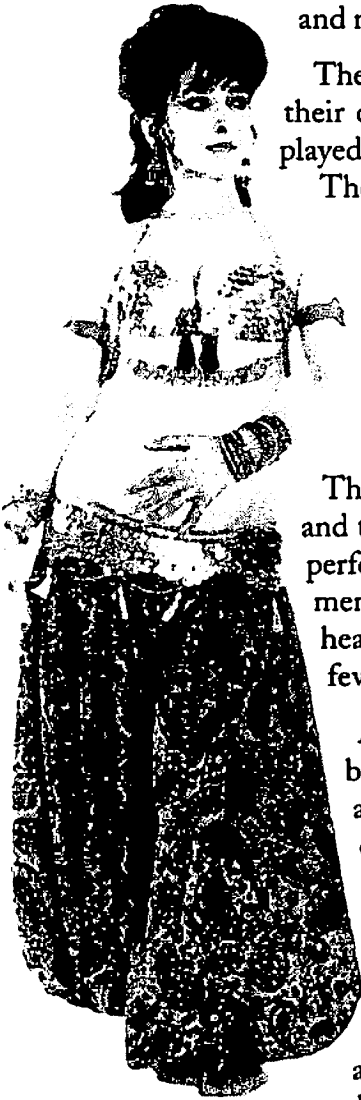
Shawki Naim, and Ahmed Hussein from Egypt, Bora Oskuk from Turkey, and Hassan Wakrim from Morocco who taught Shikatt. Some of whom were lead dancers with folkloric troupes. It was very important for me to have all styles available to my students. The dance was growing and so was our school. Although it wasn't my specialty, I made sure to have all styles explored. One week I would have a Guedra workshop, the next week Suhaila would teach the choreography she learned from Nadia Gamal.

Not only was the dance changing, but the music as well. It was no longer simply 4/4, but complicated musical compositions. A new wave of musicians from the Middle East was coming to America, and they brought the new music with them; Maharajan, Mashal, Sit il Hassan, and many more dramatic opening musicals for a dancer's show. Suhaila and I began to collaborate in a series of routines enabling the dancer to grow with the times. Once again my format took a turn. I was able to mold a blend of old style and new through my daughter's body. We were always growing and feeling a sense of accomplishment.



While Suhaila was assisting me with Oriental dance she was also studying ballet and jazz, and I watched every class. This enabled us to understand the direction of the dance interpretations of the new musical compositions. We choreographed to Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Abboud Abdel Al, Ahmad Fouad Hassan, and Farouk Salame, to name a few.

I had a large amount of information accumulated and so I published a manual in 1978. I also catalogued finger cymbal patterns, releasing an audio tape with 24 patterns and booklet with the history



Jamila, 1960

and notation of 47 patterns. I also invented loop tapes to teach Arabic dance.

The dance began changing in America when Egyptian dancers visited, bringing their own orchestras. Sohair Zeki and Nagwa Fouad brought musicians who played complicated musicals which we had never heard before or danced to; Then we choreographed our first piece, Joumana.

As videos were being made available to us, featuring Oriental dance interpretations of modern musical compositions, the Reda Troupe, Sohair Zeki, Nahed Sabri, Hanan, Mona El Said, the dance in Egypt was evolving and the Russian presence was felt with the inclusion of ballet as a prerequisite to dance in the national folkloric companies. Members of these companies began choreographing for well-known cabaret dancers.

The language that I developed enabled us to write down their choreography and teach it. From the ranks of these dancers have come some of the favorite performers and choreographers of our time. Many performers, formerly troupe members, were now doing solo cabaret. Others are choreographers we have heard of: Mohammed Khalil, Raquia Hassan, and Hassan Afifi, to name a few.

As I catalogued each step that I had seen during my years on the stage, I began to categorize the movements performed by dancers from different areas of the Middle East, all of whom were trying to interpret Egyptian dance but had dance accents from their own countries. Fatima Ali from Algeria had a unique 4/4 shimmy which she executed on the balls of her feet. I teach that now as an Algerian shimmy. What I named the Turkish drop I credit to Taboura Najim. Basic Egyptian, a step pivot walk, was like a comma between steps for most dancers.

The Arabic family, with transitions One, Two, and Three—variations on a one-foot shuffle were to be seen in almost all of the old-time Arab movies. Maya Medwar would do a figure eight from top to bottom as if being stuck between two walls. Maya has become a favorite step of dancers all over the world. Samiha was the opening step of the owner of the Club Ibis in New York. It was a horizontal 3/4 shimmy with a hesitation moving from left to right. Zenouba was a zig-zag step which was done the reverse direction of running choo-choo.

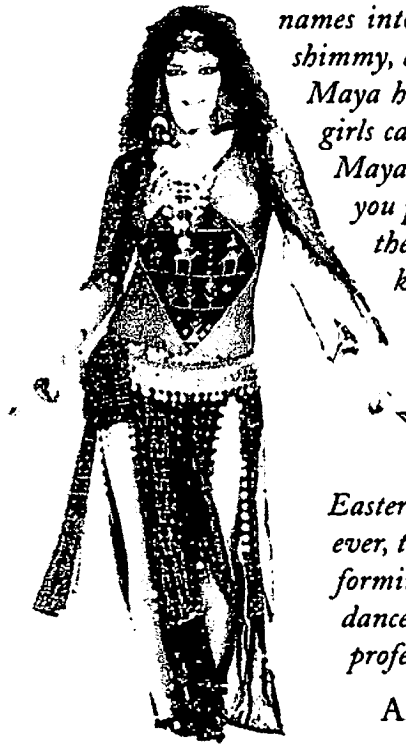
My next challenge was to put each step in order. It was the '60s and 70s and every teenager wanted to learn to belly-dance. It was important to me to structure a foundation for each dancer to be able to go from step one and progress. I didn't want them to imitate my movements so much as I wanted to be able to put a name to a step, break it down, and when I wanted them to repeat that movement I would just call out the name.

A former student, Debbie Goldman, wrote to me from Israel:

"But you should know that my basic teaching method, my ABC technique, is based on your method. Some of the movements I have obviously translated



Jamila and Subaila, 1979



*Suhaila at the
Ethnic Dance Festival,
1985*

names into Hebrew. All my students, and generally dancers in Israel know 3/4 shimmy, and they better know the difference between an up one and a down one! Maya has become a household word. It's a real popular one! Sometimes I have girls call me saying how they can't get it—and then I tell them why it's called Maya, Basic Egyptian, 5-Step, the Arabic family, etc., etc. The emphasis that you placed on correct posture, in lengthening the lower spine and holding in the stomach muscles, the up and down movement of the pelvis with the bent knee position is the best way to build the muscles and encourage flexibility and that floating look that we all want. Your technique is a sound basis and a strong foundation, giving the tools necessary for further development. We have two trends at the moment. One—is the studios and the serious students who are studying and improving and some start to perform, and two is the 'professional dancers' and groups of girls from Eastern backgrounds who think because they are Moroccan, or Iraqi, or whatever, they don't have anything to learn, so they buy and costume and start performing. In ethnic dance, there has always been a division between the folk dance of the people, and the more sophisticated professional style, and that the professional dancer has always been highly trained."

And that's the end of her letter.

Meanwhile, in analyzing, writing down, and cataloging as much as I could remember, the accumulation of information created a vast repertoire for my students to draw from and to enable them to analyze, notate, and create on their own within the form. This was becoming especially important as the dance was evolving from

the simple format to complicated musical compositions with many breaks and changes in rhythm and dramatic texture. The dance was moving to another level.

At first, Suhaila and I choreographed to Arabian Nights by Abboud Abdel Al, using almost exclusively the Salimpour format. The next challenge was Joumana, a fast-paced, unpredictable tour-de-force. Followed by Hayetti, Maharajan, Tamer Henna, 3 pieces by Mohammed Abdel Wahab, and others that we notated in Salimpour format, which also incorporated modern Egyptian movements. In our workshops we handed out the written choreography for every dance. In 1983, Suhaila was the first to represent Egyptian dance at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, performing again in 1984 and 1985. After graduating from High School, she went to dance for five years at the prestigious BYBLOS in Los Angeles, from there on to perform in Lebanon before returning to the United States.

There were others in America who were simultaneously going in the same direction. Some of my students rejected the inclusion of the western classical form into Oriental Dance because the new approach meant that when a musical composition was chosen, it had to be analyzed, and specific moves choreographed to each passage. Many dancers who were used to improvising couldn't because the pieces were too complicated.

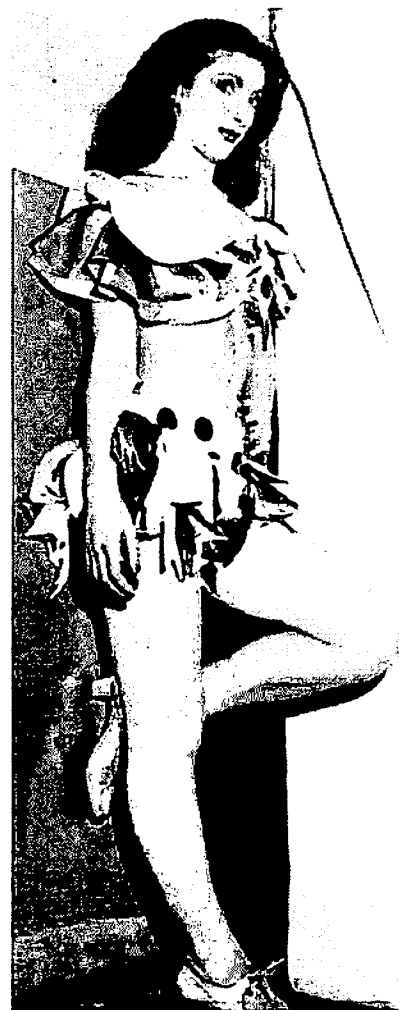
A form was developing where arms were lifted and the body line was symmetrical.

But, I want to backtrack now to the year 1967. Many of my students were disappearing from my Saturday classes. I was told that they were attending an event called the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, where, if you came in costume you got in free. In 1967 performances were spontaneous and whoever captured the stage could hold it for as long as they wished. People could and were performing along the road, gathering audiences, and causing congestion. The program director complained to me about all my students coming in costume, and performing all over the fairgrounds. She said it had to be controlled and gave the responsibility to me. We would be allowed three one-half hour performances a day and that would be it! We couldn't go over or we would be out! I knew the cabaret format would not have been suitable for the Faire and that is when my Ringling Brothers Circus background came to the rescue.

I patterned my dance troupe Bal-Anat, after a circus-like variety show which someone might see at an Arabian festival or a souk in the Middle East. It was a format with a look that was eventually imitated all over the United States, whose practitioners sometimes knew, but more often did not know, where it came from. Indeed, many people thought it was the "real thing" when in fact it was half real and half hokum. Our leaflet informed the audience that we came from many tribes. Perhaps that's where the expression "tribal dancing" originated.

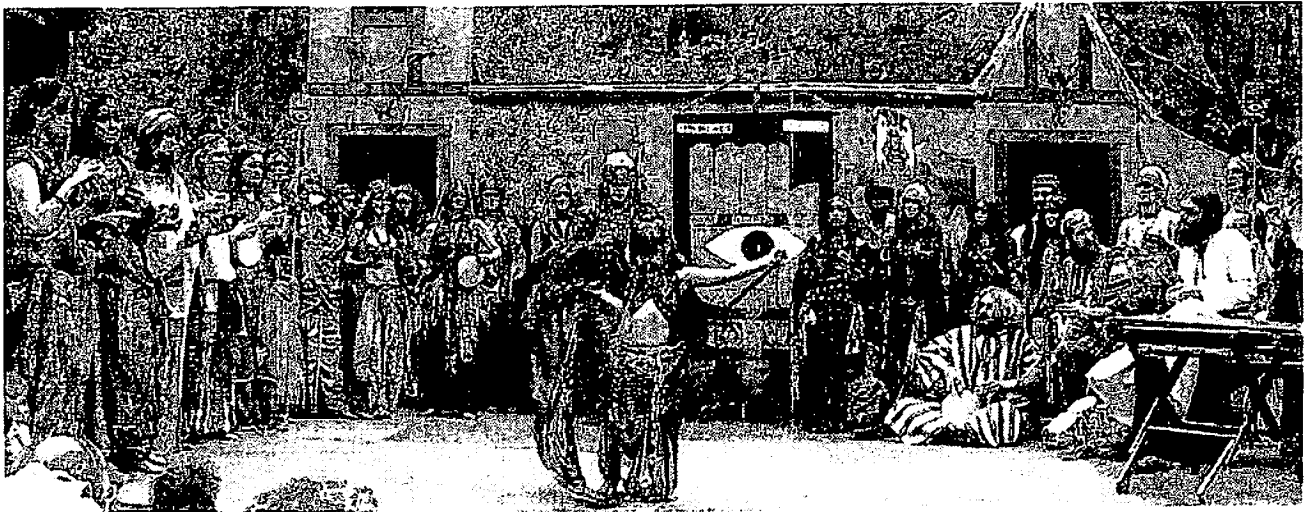
I created a variety show where each number was no more than three to five minutes long and represented a cross-section of old styles from the Middle East. We had two magicians, Gilli Gilli from Egypt, and Hassan from Morocco. I featured snake dancers, water glass dancing routines, and pot dances. Years before, Danny Reserva had given me a print by Gerome of The Sword Dancer and, copying the painting, in 1971, I had a student dance with a real Turkish sabre, balancing it on her head. For her finale she did a backbend and plunged the sword into the wooden stage where it stood upright as she retreated to make room for the next dance. That was, I believe, the first time the sword dance was seen in America. Suhaila at age 3 opened the show. We had a Ouled Nail dancer from Algeria, Kashlama dancers from Turkey, a Mother Goddess mask dancer, male tray dancers, and the list goes on and on. We even had a Greek math professor from UC Berkeley who knew how to pick a table up with his teeth, all the while balancing Suhaila on top of it. The crowd went wild.

Another first for me was the problem of music. Since the Faire would not allow recorded or amplified accompaniment of any kind, I had to search for an alternative. All the professional musicians I had worked with were not interested in getting up early, driving out to the boon-docks, playing in the dust and, worst of all, not being heard or paid a decent wage. Only Louis Habib, fulltime barber and sometime oudist, volunteered to play for us "just for fun." It wasn't long before it wasn't



Jamila backstage at Madison Square Garden while appearing with Ringling Brothers Circus in 1942.





Bal-Anat at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, 1971

fun for him anymore. The oud was a delicate instrument which was easily overpowered by drums. Not so with mizmars. After teaching to mizmar taped music for a few years, I finally managed to collect a few of them, and began to ask craftsmen at the fair if they'd like to blow into the things. We always had craftsmen at the fair coming up to us asking if they could "sit in." I wanted some structure but it was becoming hard to control. The first good, almost-Middle-Eastern sounding-mizmar player we got was



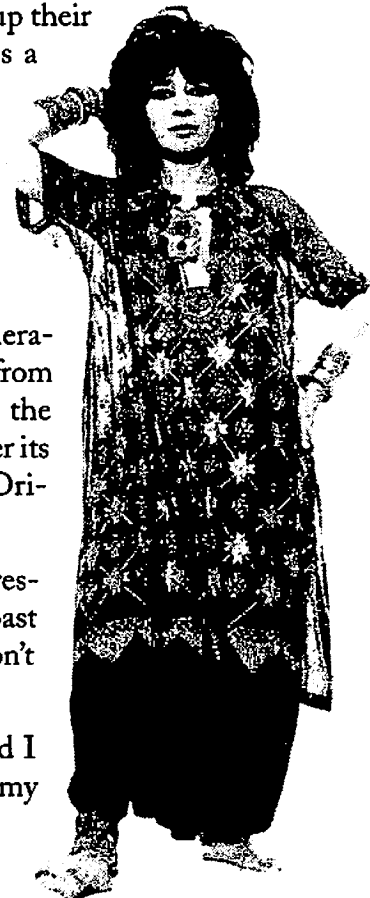
*Ernie Fishbach,
standing on the left*

craftsman/musician Ernie Fishbach, who dabbled in Indian music and had a Middle Eastern flair. He became the backbone of our Middle Eastern orchestra, teaching enthusiasts who were willing to puff up their cheeks for 30 minutes, three times a day. The ear-piercing hypnotic shrieks of several mizmars, with tabl belledi and multiple darboukas accompanying the dancers, became for many of our fans the sound of the fair.

Tradition is not static. Every generation draws from the past. Evolving from the salon and street performer, to the night-club, and concert hall, whether its Belledi, Cabaret, or Folklore, the Oriental dance will endure.

I have heard a couple of new expressions since my return to Berkeley. They are East Coast Tribal, West Coast Tribal, and the Ethnic Police, an expression I find very amusing. I don't object to anything as long as it is entertaining.

I am pleased that you honor me for my contribution to the dance and I am always happy when my method is shared. As you thank me for my format I want to thank all the dancers that have inspired me.



Jamila, 1958

Excerpts from letters to Jamila Salimpour:



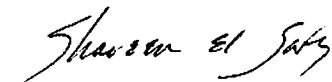
**ORANGE COAST COLLEGE
COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

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Dear Jamila Salimpour:

We would like to extend our thanks and congratulations to those who've shared their expertise to help make the International Conference on Middle Eastern Dance, May 16 - 18, 1997, a success.

In the dignified academic setting of O.C.C. we had the opportunity to acknowledge the pioneering achievements of Jamila Salimpour and Ibrahim Farrah, whose careers have inspired many and whose innovations have guided the development of our form in the West.


Shareen el Safy


Angelika Nemeth


Sahra C. Kent

Shareen el Safy
The Spirit of Egyptian Dance

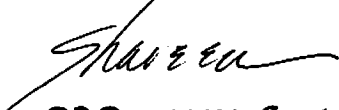
August 4, 1997

Dear Jamila-

Jamila, I am indebted to you for agreeing to present at the Conference. Your long-standing reputation and "high-profile" stature acted as a magnet for the event; and without your involvement I doubt that we would have drawn either the numbers or the high caliber of participants. Your presentation facilitated and clarified an overview of the development of our field here in the West. Your voice, offering a substantial body of experience and knowledge, fed our emerging collective identity, and was invaluable to us all. Thank you so much!

It was a great occasion to salute you and your work, and to personally and publically recognize your legacy for posterity. Your past and present endeavors continue to nourish the further growth of our field.

With Love and Admiration,



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